

Chapter 6

Liturgical Philosophy of Religion: An Untimely Manifesto about Sincerity, Acceptance, and Hope



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Abstract This loosely-argued manifesto contains some suggestions regarding what the philosophy of religion might become in the twenty-first century. It was written for a brainstorming workshop over a decade ago, and some of the recommendations and predictions it contains have already been partly actualized (that's why it is now a bit "untimely"). The goal is to sketch three aspects of a salutary "liturgical turn" in philosophy of religion. (Note: "liturgy" here refers very broadly to communal religious service and experience generally, not anything specifically "high church.") The first involves the attitudes that characterize what I call the "liturgical stance" towards various doctrines. The second focuses on the "vested" propositional objects of those attitudes. The third looks at how those doctrines are represented, evoked, and embodied in liturgical contexts. My untimely rallying-cry is that younger philosophers of religion might do well to set aside debates regarding knowledge and justified belief, just as their elders set aside debates regarding religious language. When we set aside knowledge in this way, we make room for dis-

***Note:** This essay has its origins in a talk I gave a decade ago at a conference for "younger, up-and-coming philosophers of religion" at Boston University. The talk contained a lot of sketches and suggestions, and not many arguments, which is why I called it, somewhat ironically, a "manifesto." In the intervening decade, some of the turns I was anticipating (towards practice, "vested" doctrines, and communal practice) have started to take place. I note some of these developments in the [bracketed and italicized] footnotes, but have left the body of the piece largely unchanged, since taking account of the progress over the intervening years would require an entirely different kind of contribution. So it remains a manifesto, albeit now an "untimely" one.

I am grateful to M. David Eckel and his colleagues at the Boston Institute for Philosophy and Religion for the invitation to think about this topic back then, and to Eckel, Allen Speight, Troy DuJardin, and *Boston Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Life* for inviting me to revisit the essay for the present volume.

I dedicate it to Marilyn McCord Adams, whose (also untimely) death in 2017 deprived many of us of a beloved teacher, mentor, exemplar, and friend. Marilyn embodied the liturgical turn in philosophy of religion about as well as anyone could. *Gratias tibi ago.*

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cussions of faith that in turn shed light on neglected but philosophically-interesting aspects of lived religious practice.

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6.1 Philosophy of Religion in the Twenty-First Century

Several years ago I attended a panel discussion at the American Philosophical Association: the topic was “Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century.”¹ Panelists were asked to theorize—or at least speculate—about the path they thought the discipline would take over the present century; they were also asked to make some recommendations of their own. The panel featured three distinguished Anglo-American philosophers of religion; each one a household name for anyone working in the field.

There are a few key things about the panel that I recall now, a few years down the road. The first is that a huge number of people attended the session: many more than I’d expected. The second is that some of the younger people in the audience came with great expectations: these were famous practitioners of the craft who had been at it for a long time, and we were eager to hear their predictions and recommendations. The third is that there was a slight but palpable sense of disappointment among many of those same audience members at the end of the session. The source of this disappointment, according to the brief and wholly unscientific survey that I took afterwards, was that two of the three panelists had predicted and recommended that business would continue more or less as usual. Discussions of the rationality of theistic belief, of the content and coherence of theistic doctrine, of the connection between that sort of theism and ethics, and of the logical and evidential threat posed by evil—according to these two speakers—will and should remain *the* central topics in the field.

To be sure, the panelists did propose some tweaking of the business-as-usual model: the first recommended that we focus less on knowledge and more on *internalist* justification of belief, and in particular on how Bayesian forms of probabilistic reasoning can show that religious belief is often rational. The motive he provided for this was that internalist justification (as opposed to the kind of externalist “warrant” that, together with true belief, makes for knowledge) is precisely the sort of thing that religious practitioners alike really *want and need* in the end—for apologetic purposes as well as personal edification. Externalist reflection on how we might turn out to know something about God—even if we don’t know *that* or *how*

¹I’ve told bits of this story before (Chignell 2013) but am reproducing it here in more detail since it seemed like the best way to introduce the present topic.

we know it—is less satisfying in these respects: a second-best consolation when internalist justification is not in the offing.

The second panelist's tweaks included the recommendation that the discipline open itself up further to people who are pantheistic, panentheistic, agnostic, atheistic, and so forth, in an effort to deemphasize classical apologetics and promote pluralism and fruitful dialogue.

So why were some audience members disappointed? It's not that they were entirely opposed to internalism about (probabilistic) justification or uninterested in the concept of belief and its connection to religious doctrine. There was also no perceptible aversion to including agnostics, atheists, and those with "alternative" conceptions of God among the ranks of philosophers of religion.² There was some discomfort about the fact that all three of the panelists were Caucasian men. But the main source of unhappiness seemed rather (and again this comes from my very unscientific survey) to stem from the fact that these prognostications and recommendations were symptomatic of a general narrowness-of-focus that often characterizes philosophy of religion in analytic circles. Or, put another way, for many in the audience, the fact that these two prominent and distinguished figures would endorse a business-as-usual future heightened the suspicion that such narrowness is at least an ongoing threat, and that after the impressive flourishing of the past forty years we have now reached a period of scholastic stasis in which familiar problems are hashed out in ever finer detail, but genuinely new directions are difficult to find.

Having noted some general responses to the panel's proceedings, it's worth making a couple of further points about what the first panelist said in particular. The focus on *theistic belief* and its internalist justifications (or externalist warrants for that matter), as well as the various challenges to such belief, is undeniably important and central to the field. There is no doubt that questions regarding the existence and character of God or gods, personal or impersonal, pantheist or panentheist, and the like, are pertinent in almost every world religion, and that it would be valuable to settle some of them once and for all (were that possible). It would also be valuable to settle questions about whether, how, and when someone might justifiably *believe* that there is a deity of one of these sorts, or that there isn't, and how the existence of evil and suffering may or may not challenge that sort of belief.

But while it would be valuable to settle some of these issues if we could, and while the now-retiring 'vanguard' generation of metaphysics-friendly philosophers of religion has made crucial progress towards this goal, I'm tempted to think that any ultimate conclusions would still have little bearing on the situation of many actual religious people as they actually live their traditions. That's because, I

²In fact, I think non-theistic like Graham Oppy, Louise Antony, Jeffrey Stout, and Paul Draper or "alternative-theistic" writers like J.L. Schellenberg, Mark Johnston, Philip Clayton, and Catherine Keller have provided some of the more interesting recent contributions to the field, and that these contributions have been read and appreciated. My sense is that the people who have the hardest time in professional philosophy of religion are those who write confessionally but from 'fringe' movements like Mormonism, Pentecostalism, Adventism, Swedenborgianism, Falun Gong, and so on.

suspect, many religious people do not often have the attitude of full *belief* with respect to many doctrines that characterize the traditions of which they are a part. I also suspect that many members of the average church, synagogue, temple, or mosque understandably will not have a maximally clear sense of *what it is* that they are supposed to believe (example: are Christians supposed to *believe* the doctrine of Ascension? What would that amount to in a contemporary cosmology?). And even when people do believe and clearly understand the doctrines, I doubt that many do so in an internalistically justified way.³

If the suspicions I've just aired are correct, then questions about *belief* and its justification, while still deserving a place in our discussion, threaten to be incomplete in at least two ways: first, they respond to the largely academic interest we have in sketching a regulative (and possibly western) ideal—the ideal of someone who firmly and muscularly *believes* that God exists, say, and does so in a way that is clearly internalistically justified. It is largely academic, I am suggesting, not only because that sort of justification is hard to come by, but because not many actual religious people—outside of a few epistemological saints, perhaps⁴—seem to have such firm belief or knowledge.

Second, although the first distinguished member of the APA panel is an important exception,⁵ those who advise us to focus on the justification of theistic belief often recommend that we ignore the thick and messy content of actual religious attitudes and doctrines in order to isolate the “bare” theistic doctrines shared by most major monotheisms and henotheisms—doctrines whose content is clear and whose justification is easier to establish. This serves a purpose when confronting people like J.L. Mackie who argue that even bare theism is incoherent and thus “miraculous” (Mackie 1983). But it too is a useful theoretical abstraction, since even when monotheists and henotheists do have genuine beliefs, it is unlikely that they are restricted to “bare” versions of their doctrines (a possible exception here would be self-conscious deists like Thomas Jefferson).

The two abstractions complement each other: by narrowing its doctrinal focus to bare theism for much of the past forty years, philosophy of religion has been able to isolate and deal with questions about belief and knowledge in an increasingly sophisticated way. We now have a pretty good sense of the various conceptions of justification, warrant, entitlement, reliability, epistemic virtue, “special K,”⁶ etc. as

³In many non-western traditions, belief and doctrine obviously do not play the central role that they are thought to play in western monotheistic traditions. If that's right, then the point I am making here may be even more relevant in e.g. the Shinto, Taoist, Confucian, Jain, and Buddhist contexts. On the other hand, there may also be traditions and global contexts where belief comes much more easily, and religion is more doxastically vibrant (for better and for worse). For a seminal discussion of the Indian tradition on this issue, see Griffiths (1990).

⁴See Chignell (2002).

⁵The first panelist actually included as part of his tweak of the business-as-usual model that we move on to discussing Bayesian justifications for specific Christian doctrines such as Incarnation and Resurrection. It will now be clear to many readers who that panelist was.

⁶This is Stephen Wykstra's neologism for whatever quantity or quality it is that turns true belief into knowledge (he doesn't like the term “warrant” for various reasons).

well as their various sources and conditions. And, again, there is no doubt that forty or fifty years ago, when the climate in academic philosophy was much more hostile to metaphysics and religion, this was exactly the right place to begin. Still, a byproduct of this is that we have circumscribed our philosophical sense of what lived religious *faith* actually is—and the resources on which such faith draws in coping with various theoretical and practical challenges—to the point where our discussion sometimes borders on real-world irrelevance.

Returning once again to the APA panel: I mentioned that there was a third panelist—actually he was, if I recall correctly, the commentator on the other two talks. This panelist discussed the business-as-usual model and recommended certain aspects of it as well as a few tweaks. But at some point in his remarks he added, almost as an aside, that he thought that a new and profitable turn that philosophy of religion might take is towards an engagement with the liturgies of various real-world traditions. Under questioning later, the panelist declined to elaborate, saying that it was just a kind of hunch that he had, and that “it’s up to you all”—gesturing at the then-younger scholars in the room—to figure out what it might involve.⁷

I was provoked by this remark, and have reflected on it occasionally over the intervening years. So when I was asked to contribute a paper to this collection, I decided to take the opportunity to reflect a bit more on what a liturgical or liturgically-oriented approach to philosophy of religion might be. My goal in what remains is to sketch three main aspects of what I will call “liturgical philosophy of religion”—three ways in which philosophers of religion can focus less on the idealized case of justified bare theistic belief, and more on the *philosophically-significant aspects of religious adherence as it is grounded, modeled, and inculcated in communal ceremonies and related practices*. The approach I’m describing is aptly called “liturgical,” then, not because it involves philosophers themselves engaging in liturgies or rituals when reflecting on relevant topics (although I do think we have our own rituals—at conferences and job-talks, say). Rather, it is “liturgical” because it looks to real-world religious practice—and especially the sort of practice that goes on in group services (*leitourgia*)—to broaden the focus of our theorizing about religious attitudes, doctrines, actions, and the ways we represent them. Note: I mean “liturgical” extremely broadly here: a lot of people in “low church” contexts won’t think of themselves as “liturgical-types,” but of course do engage in corporate religious practices and rituals that could easily fit in here. Further, as we’ll see below, liturgical philosophy of religion may not even be *strictly* about the communal: an individual’s adherence and practice can be liturgically-informed and inflected, even when she is on her own.

A key part of the method sketched here involves generating an account of what it is to take a “liturgical stance” towards a doctrine. Participating in a religious service or liturgy in a way that goes beyond just observing—or vaguely following along out of mindless habit or because your family drags you out to synagogue,

⁷ [2020 update: In fact he did not leave it “up to you all” in the end, and in 2018 published a substantial monograph on the philosophy of liturgy. It will now be clear who that panelist was as well.]

church, or mosque on the holidays—involves taking some form of this stance towards what is being said and done. Paradigmatically, this stance is something that religious communities take up together. Once learned, however, individuals can also take it up alone.

In the next section, I discuss the propositional *attitudes* that characterize the liturgical stance, and suggest that talk of belief will often be inadequate. One key set of questions has to do with the other sorts of attitudes that can be involved in the stance; another has to do with the logical and psychological relations between those attitudes. In Sect. 6.3, I look at the propositional *objects* of those attitudes and how we might philosophize about them in ways that are liturgically informed. I also briefly consider whether morally objectionable doctrines are the proper object of the liturgical stance, or whether there are some historical doctrines that we should simply refuse to engage, even insincerely. Finally, in Sect. 6.4, I'll gesture at how philosophers might think about how these “vested” doctrines are *represented and evoked* in liturgical contexts.

Obviously, the scope of the discussion here is limited, since I only have space to discuss our liturgical relationships to propositions. There is much more to say, for instance, about the way that services and communal practices relate to *concrete* entities: persons, material objects, artistic performances, memories, and so on. There is also, obviously, more to say about the *actions* involved in taking up and maintaining the liturgical stance.

6.2 Liturgical Attitudes

Here are some paradigmatic examples of liturgical action in religious contexts: kneeling on a carpet and praying towards Mecca, taking a vow of chastity, kissing an icon, participating in a Passover seder, performing a ceremonial cleansing in the Ganges, eating a wafer out of the fingers of a priest. There are also liturgical actions in non-religious contexts: singing a team's anthem, bowing to a martial arts teacher, saluting a flag. I leave open, for present purposes, whether liturgical actions in non-religious contexts involve taking the liturgical stance that I'm about to describe, although I suspect they sometimes do. Finally, there are “liturgical” actions that an individual performs alone, but as a result of, or in an effort to stay connected to, the actions of a larger group. Examples include performing a seder alone during a quarantine, taking a private vow of chastity in preparation for joining an order, or praying towards Mecca at certain times each day in the knowledge that others are doing the same.

Taking the liturgical stance, as I'm conceiving of it here, often involves a kind of teleological insincerity—“insincerity upwards,” so to speak. Such insincerity comes in degrees, as is illustrated by the following Ladder:

The Ladder of Liturgical Sincerity

- On the bottom and most insincere (but still “upwards”-oriented) rung is the *inquirer* who performs liturgical actions simply because he wants to *understand what it is like* to be a member of the relevant faith-community—i.e., to understand what it is like to say those things and make those individual and collective movements. A participant like this need not believe the doctrines or even mean to assert them when he mouths them; indeed, he might self-consciously suspend judgment or even believe their negations. (Certain efforts in journalism and participant-observer anthropology might also be included on this rung.)
- On the next rung up the ladder, the *discerner* is not just seeking what-it-is-like understanding, but also trying to figure out whether she wants to join the group. This is what motivates the performance of the actions and the making of the assertions that partially constitute group-membership. There is a sincere desire to discern, but an insincerity in the actions and utterances.
- Another rung up is the *conditional seeker* -- someone who is really giving it a try, who doesn't yet believe in (for example) God's existence but wants to be part of the group, and who thinks that *if* God exists, then he is in fact praising God, or thanking God, etc., and that this would be a good and fitting thing to do.
- Close to the top rung on ladder of teleological insincerity is the *initiate* who decides (for e.g. pragmatic or moral reasons) that she *accepts*, and is thus participating in liturgies (saying the shema, performing the hajj, taking holy water) in an effort to move “upwards” into genuine belief, at least with respect to some doctrines. This is the sort of “fake it to make it” posture that Pascal made famous. (Note: I'll say more about belief and acceptance in Sect. 6.2.1 and 6.2.2.)
- There are numerous rungs in between, but at the very top of the ladder we find the *utterly convinced*. This is someone who entirely inhabits the liturgical stance, and has a steady and sincere belief that the relevant propositions are true. (Note: I will suggest below that such sincerity is not always a good thing.)⁸

Switching from Pascal to Wittgenstein, we can say that these different modes of teleological insincerity are different ways of exploring the grammar of a certain language—speaking it along with others in order to see how it fits with one's own. Every religious tradition I know of allows for such grammatical experimentation by inquirers, discerners, seekers, and initiates, and most concede that such teleological insincerity characterizes many established members of the community as well. The suspicions I was articulating earlier, then, could be restated this way: although there may be many *native* speakers of these religious languages, there are not many *fluent* ones. Completely “making it” into utterly convinced sincerity in liturgical practice is hard to achieve – even for those who grew up in the tradition. Indeed, many life-long religious practioners still inhabit the space of “insincerity upwards,” somewhere between the initiate and the utterly convinced.

⁸Thanks to Keith DeRose for discussion of these degrees of sincerity. [2020 update: For DeRose's own efforts to explain and defend the “suspicion that hardly anyone, if anyone at all, knows whether God exists,” see his (2018).]

It is crucial to note, however, that the Ladder is not a rank ordering of virtue: the fact that almost everyone is a little bit insincere and does not make it to the top rung in every engagement is salutary given some of the doctrines involved. For example, I suspect that many Catholics, Episcopalians, and Lutherans who say the Nicene Creed in a liturgy do not really *believe* propositions about, say, the Virgin Birth or the Ascension, and wouldn't want to if they could.⁹ They may utter them, and perhaps even accept them, but be content all the same not to believe them. More significantly, I think it is *morally* preferable on the whole that people in the Reformed tradition *not* be utterly convinced about some of the nastier bits of the Belgic Confession or the Canons of Dort (about the doctrine of reprobation and the “enormities” of the Anabaptists); this is true even if they utter them in liturgical contexts. It likewise seems preferable for Muslims not to assent in full sincerity to the (alleged) injunctions in the Koran to “combat” (*Qital*) those who oppose them, and for male Jews not to be fully sincere if they utter the daily prayer thanking God that they were not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

If something like this picture of the liturgical stance and the Ladder of Sincerity is accurate, then the attitudes that many “believers,” sympathetic agnostics, and even “non-believers” take towards doctrines is far more complicated than talk of belief, partial belief, or degrees of belief suggests. And so a philosophy of religion that takes its cues from liturgical practice will need to go beyond belief to an analysis of the various *other* kinds of attitude—and their justification and defeat conditions—that seem religiously significant. In what follows I will say a bit more about belief and then look at a couple of alternative attitudes that may be involved in religious practice and engagement.

6.2.1 *Belief*

There is more than one way to affirm a proposition – to take it to be true. The two kinds of affirmation I focus on here are *belief* and *acceptance*. Suppose we follow (without any argument¹⁰) the broadly Humean tradition in philosophy that construes belief as *a disposition to feel that a proposition p is true*. It's a *disposition* because not all of our beliefs are occurrent states: there are far too many of them for that.

⁹Again, the doctrine of Ascension is particularly curious in the context of contemporary cosmology – if there were drones or satellite cameras around at the time, what would they have picked up: a flesh and blood body just zooms up into the sky and then... keeps going into outer space? Is vaporized in the stratosphere somewhere? Transmutes into another invisible realm at some point? Even if they can believe in the Resurrection, I'm really not sure what Christians are *supposed* to believe on this score.

¹⁰It is consistent with most of what I say here that belief is *not* the disposition to have a certain feeling, but rather some other kind of disposition to take a proposition to be true. So the Humean flavor of the discussion is incidental, although I myself am inclined towards a Humean view of belief.

(Here consider the plausible locution, “Yes I’d never really thought of it before, but come to think of it I *do* believe that.”)

The *phenomenology* that characterizes (or, if Hume is right, partly constitutes) occurrent belief is hard to describe, in part because it is so familiar. We all know what it is like to have it, though: consider the proposition *that Barack Hussain Obama is the President of the United States*.¹¹ Whatever other feelings this proposition may occasion in you, there is the “vivacious and lively” feeling that is characteristic of belief: consideration of the proposition evokes a kind of internal nod, a kind of yes-phenomenology, you feel impelled towards it, it comes “bathed in the light of truth.” This feeling—if that’s the right way to describe it—is unusual in that it is directed towards a proposition or a state of affairs: items that many metaphysicians will classify as abstract objects. Most of our other feelings, by contrast, are either non-intentional (we just have them and they aren’t really directed towards anything) or they are directed towards concrete objects. But even when non-doxastic feelings *are* directed towards abstract objects—e.g. my feeling terrible about the **fact** *that I failed to keep my promise*, my feeling queasy about the **number** 666, my feeling of pleasure directed towards the **universal** that is a Beethoven symphony¹²—they are often partly *caused* in us by a belief: by the belief that I failed to keep my promise; by the belief about what others have said about the number 666; or by memorial beliefs about particular performances of that symphony.

In sum, the feeling that is characteristic of belief is often at the bottom of, and in any case not reducible to, the many other sorts of feelings and emotions that we have. In light of this, I propose simply to take specifically doxastic feeling as *primitive*: it is that characteristic bottom-level phenomenology you have when occurrently entertaining the proposition that *I am reading a breathless manifesto* or that *Vladimir Putin is the President of the Russian Federation*.¹³ It is different, I want to suggest, from the kind of feeling we often have towards doctrinal propositions when engaged in liturgical practices. The latter is less sensitive to evidence, and often more fleeting – a just-in-the-moment kind of episode that fades away once the liturgy concludes.

This Humean view of belief isn’t essential to the picture I’m sketching here: other models of belief as a primitive sort of “taking to be true” or a “world-to-mind direction of fit” would serve. One advantage of modeling belief in this Humean way, however, is that it makes it vivid that belief isn’t something we can typically *directly* produce in ourselves, simply by trying. Feelings are the sorts of states that come over us, that are caused in us. Sometimes they are responses *to* something: in the belief case, to the presence of what seems like evidence for the truth of a proposition. I can of course *indirectly* generate in myself the feeling that I am at the conference, say, by getting out of bed and going up to campus, finding the conference

¹¹ [2020 update: *Alas that phenomenology has changed quite dramatically.*]

¹² Is that right? Or do we only feel something towards particular instantiations of the symphony?

¹³ I do not take this to entail that *belief* itself is primitive or irreducible. It’s consistent with what I say here about the *feeling* involved in occurrent belief that belief itself be analyzable (i.e. it may involve something other or more than just this doxastic feeling).

room, and so on. But if all my evidence suggests that I am not at a conference, but rather hiking up Cayuga Gorge in the footsteps of Malcolm and Wittgenstein, then I cannot—just by girding up my doxastic loins (so to speak), furrowing my brows, and *trying* really hard—*directly* produce in myself the feeling that I am at the conference in Goldwin Smith Hall. This is what is meant by the familiar dictum that belief is not (or at least not very often¹⁴) under the direct control of the will.

The recognition of this familiar “direct doxastic involuntarist” point leads naturally to questions about the subject-matter of the field that is now called the “ethics of belief.”¹⁵ Most of us agree that praise and blame are appropriate with respect to an act-type only if tokens of that type are under our control in some way. This agreement is presumably based on the intuition that some version of ‘ought-implies-can’ is correct – an intuition as pervasive among compatibilists as it is among incompatibilists about free will. Conversely, if a phenomenon is not (typically) voluntary in at least *some* sense (a sense that may be compatible with determinism), then it is hard to see how we could be genuinely *praiseworthy* or *blameworthy* for having performed it.¹⁶ Many views in the ethics of belief debate, however, presume that there *are* norms governing our various acts and practices of belief-formation, and that some of them are genuinely *moral* norms supporting praise and blame ascriptions. W.K. Clifford articulated his moral norm in this way: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1999, 77). In his response, William James famously scoffed at the stringency of “that delicious *enfant terrible*” (i.e. Clifford), arguing instead for the more liberal policy that we often have the “right to believe” even when we lack sufficient evidence (and even when we *know* that we lack it). In places, James goes further and suggests that in certain contexts, it is not merely permitted but *positively commendable* or even *rationally required* that we “decide a live option” on insufficient evidence.¹⁷ This is particularly true, says James, with respect to religious questions.¹⁸

¹⁴ There may be a few unusual counterexamples to the general principle. See Ginet 2001. More recently, people like Brian Weatherson (2008), Kieran Setiya (2008), and Pamela Hieronymi (2008) have raised different sorts of objections to direct doxastic involuntarism. [2020 update: The number of papers on this topic has exploded over the past decade.]

¹⁵ [2020 update: For an overview, see Chignell (2018).]

¹⁶ See Pereboom (2002) for an argument according to which we could still be *accountable* for it.

¹⁷ Compare James (1956, 11): “Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.”

¹⁸ My favorite passage in *The Will to Believe*: “When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and *wait* – acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true – till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and sense working together may have raked in evidence enough, – this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave” (James 1956, 30).

Given ought-implies-can and the uncontroversial point about belief's typical involuntariness, I think we have to assume that these early ethicists of belief are *either* talking about norms on the *indirect* ways in which we produce belief in ourselves, or not really talking about belief at all. It seems most charitable to Clifford to read him as claiming that there are contexts in which we have a moral duty *indirectly* to produce in ourselves a certain belief—that the ship is safe, say—*by way of* collecting sufficient evidence. In keeping with this, contemporary Cliffordians focus on our responsibility for the *indirect* ways in which our belief-formation and belief-suspension is voluntary and thus susceptible to moral evaluation.¹⁹

James, likewise, can be read as admitting the direct doxastic involuntarist point, and then claiming that in the right contexts we can *indirectly* produce in ourselves beliefs that lack sufficient evidence. If this is right, then he is closer to Pascal than he sometimes lets on.²⁰ Another reading, however, has him shifting our focus away from belief altogether and towards other kinds of propositional attitudes that *are* typically voluntary. What is often referred to as “acceptance” is such a kind, and one in which philosophers of religion have recently started to take an interest.²¹

6.2.2 Acceptance

Acceptance is another way to affirm a proposition – to take it to be true. Acceptance as typically construed (e.g. by Michael Bratman, L. Jonathan Cohen, William Alston, Robert Audi, Edna Ullman-Margalit, Philip Pettit, and, surprisingly enough, Immanuel Kant) is different from belief, but is also more robust than mere assumption-for-the-sake-of-argument. It is a voluntary attitude towards *p*, adopted in certain contexts for broadly practical reasons, and it can motivate assertion that *p*, deliberation on the basis of *p*, and acting-as-if *p*. While there may be some constraints on how *much* evidence we can have against *p* and still rationally accept it, the acceptance itself is partly justified by something other than evidence, and it

¹⁹ See, for example, Wood (2002). Cf. Stocker (1982) and Feldman (2002), esp. p. 675ff.

²⁰ James writes in the *Principles of Psychology* that “those to whom ‘God’ and ‘Duty’ are now mere names can make them much more than that, if they make a little sacrifice to them every day. But all this

is so well known in moral and religious education that I need say no more.” This suggests, in a Pascalian spirit, that he views the “belief” involved in religious faith as something that can be voluntarily produced through inculcation and practice (rather than seeking evidence). See James (1890, 948–949).

²¹ I don’t mean to suggest that there is *no* way to support talk of obligations on direct acts of belief-formation while trying to absorb the involuntarist datum that such acts are not under the direct control of the will. I will set aside discussion of these more complicated positions here. See Feldman (2002) and Adler (2006).

typically lacks the characteristic phenomenology of belief.²² In other words: whereas belief is a state resulting from the perceived presence of sufficient *evidence* for the truth of the proposition (hence on the Humean view it is a disposition to the involuntary “feeling” that the proposition is true), acceptance is an attitude that we take on board for *more* than just epistemic, evidential reasons.²³ Again, my sense is that although he often uses the language of “belief,” it is *not* belief in our sense but rather something like *acceptance* that James—and Kant before him—took to be involved in religious faith and liturgical practice (and in other parts of our lives as well). If that is correct, then these broadly practical pictures of faith might be compatible with Clifford’s view that *belief* is governed by evidentialist norms.²⁴

6.2.3 Hope and Trust

Kant was no fan of liturgy and “priestcraft,” but he did suggest that “What may I hope?” is one of the three great questions in philosophy, and also the one that ought to be addressed in *Religionsphilosophie*.²⁵ He says in his lectures on the topic, as well as in the published *Religion* book itself, that the “minimum of theology” or “minimum of cognition in religion” is the *hope* that God exists and the belief or faith (*Glaube*) that God is really possible (and that *if* God exists, then God endorses the moral law (28:998; 6:153–4 and note)). Some commentators read this as articulating an appealingly low standard for religiosity, since even agnostics and atheists could achieve it. Others view this as articulating an appallingly low standard for religiosity, inadequate to characterize authentic religious faith.²⁶

²² For contemporary accounts of the distinction between (involuntary) “belief” and (voluntary) “acceptance,” see Cohen (1992), Bratman (1992), Ullman-Margalit and Margalit (1992), and Pettit (1998). Not all concepts of acceptance are the same, however. Robert Stalnaker develops a concept of “acceptance” that is much broader than this: it seems quite close to the genus of “positive propositional attitudes,” of which “acceptance” is of course just a species. See ch. 5 of Stalnaker (1984). For discussions of acceptance in a religious context, see Alston (1996) and Audi (2008). [2020 update: *There’s been an explosion of work on this issue, too, including a series of key articles by Howard-Snyder (e.g. 2013). See also Malcolm and Scott (2017), Page (2017), and Audi (2019). For an intriguing view that leaves open whether to assimilate acceptance and outright belief (but not credences), see Bolinger (2020)*]

²³ This is compatible with thinking that acceptance may or must meet *some* limited epistemic conditions.

²⁴ For Kant’s picture, see Chignell (2007) and Chignell (2009). German is tricky, because the word “*Glaube*” can often pick out our concept of belief *or* our concept of faith, depending on context. Interestingly, Kant too uses the language of “acceptance” sometimes, defining “*Annehmung*” in the Dohna-Wundlacken lectures as “a contingent approval that has sufficient ground in regard to a certain purpose” (Kant 1902–, 24:735). [2020 update: *For another articulation of this combination of evidentialism about belief and a practical account of the justification of faith, see Wood 2020.*]

²⁵ [2020 update: *for more on Kant’s views on hope in philosophy of religion, see Chignell (2014) and Wood (2020).*]

²⁶ See the “Introduction” and other contributions to Firestone and Palmquist (eds.), (2006).

Perhaps we can bring these competing perspectives a little closer by suggesting that Kant's point is that rational hope that various doctrines are true (which is what religion adds to pure Kantian morality) requires only one "practico-dogmatic"²⁷ commitment—namely, the acceptance that God's existence is really possible. But a liturgical stance in conjunction with this "minimal" modal commitment may still involve a sophisticated complex of *other* attitudes, desires, virtues, and affections—including hope for extramundane assistance—that would not fit very well within a determinedly atheistic framework. Apart from the modal commitment, perhaps, many of these other states involved in speratic religion won't require the sorts of justification or warrant that epistemologists tend to discuss. At his best, then, Kant provides a new formulation of how to be authentically religious – and how to do philosophy of religion – without worrying so much about what and why we believe.

But if we are going to say that a deep and life-structuring kind of hope is sufficient for authentic religious engagement -- sufficient for occupying an authentic form of the liturgical stance -- we will need an account of hope and of what "deep and life-structuring" means in this context (since clearly hope can also be superficial or even idle). What would it be for a set of religious hopes to structure our lives? Could they do so in the same way that faith (conceived either as belief or as acceptance) does?²⁸ Is deep hope of this sort voluntary in some way? And would such hope involve *other* commitments, beyond the belief or faith that its object is really possible? Finally, does this kind of hope require something like *trust* in some entity (God, nature, history, karma, Fichte's "living moral order")? Can "trust in" be both rational and yet neutral as to whether its object exists?²⁹

I won't try to offer determinate answers to those questions here. My point, rather, is to argue that the epistemologist's favorite propositional attitude—i.e. belief—should not be presumed by philosophers of religion to be the kind of attitude that is most important or even central to religious life on the ground (or in the place of worship). I have also suggested (more controversially) that the attitude that many religious adults take towards many doctrinal propositions is *rarely* that of belief, and even more rarely counts as knowledge. Philosophers tend to be *epistemologists* or *gnosologists*—they are looking for an account of *episteme* (*scientia*, *Wissen*) or perhaps *gnosis* (*cognitio*, *Erkenntnis*). Philosophers of religion have often followed suit. The liturgical turn, however, would involve focusing our efforts on being *pistologists* and *elpistologists*—looking for an account of *pistis* (*fides*, *Glaube*, *faith*) and *elpis* (*spes*, *Hoffnung*, *hope*). It is clearly consistent with hope that *p*, and may be consistent with faith that *p*, that one fails to believe *p* or even believes that *not-p*. (Thus the Biblical exclamation "I believe, help Thou my unbelief!" could be rendered less paradoxically as "I hope and sometimes even accept, help Thou my

²⁷ For this terminology, see the *Real Progress* essay (1902-, 20:305ff).

²⁸ See for instance Jürgen Moltmann's groundbreaking work on hope, starting with his (1964). My sense is that Moltmann conflates hope with expectation in a way that is sometimes misleading. Compare Muyskens (1979). [2020 update: See also Chignell (2014) and (draft).]

²⁹ [2020 update: See McKaughan (2013), Kvanvig (2014); Johnston (2019), Pace and McKaughan, (forthcoming).]

unbelief, assuming that belief would be a good thing in this context!") A liturgical philosophy of religion, then, would go beyond the narrow focus on questions about whether belief is justified (and warranted and safe, etc.), and may even "set aside" belief altogether, in order to make room for something like *acceptance* as a key component of the liturgical stance.³⁰

6.3 Liturgical Objects

So far we have looked at some of the propositional *attitudes* that characterize the liturgical stance, and I have suggested that twenty-first century philosophers of religion could profit from looking more closely at their nature, sources, and justification conditions. In this section I want consider the *objects* of such attitudes—i.e., the doctrinal propositions themselves to which we take up the liturgical stance—and see whether the roles they play in various religious rituals can tell us something about how a liturgical philosopher might best reflect on them.

It is worth noting, first, that there are very few liturgies for "bare theism" (except, perhaps, in certain Unitarian traditions): despite John Hick's massive influence in the pluralism debate, no group has yet formed to write *The Book of Hickean Prayer* in which invocations and petitions are addressed to the thing-in-itself, the Real behind all conventional religious appearances. Rather, most real-world religious rituals involve the invocation of much more *robust* and *specific* religious doctrines. A liturgical philosophy, then, would focus on these "vested" doctrines of extant traditions, rather than the "bare" theological-ethical core that unites two or more religions.³¹ It would also see its goal not in apologetic terms as that of mounting a defense of some doctrine or other and thus trying to make that doctrine as bare as possible in order successfully to complete its mission. Rather, the goal would be to work out the grammar of a sophisticated religious vocabulary in order to promote—primarily—reflective understanding of that vocabulary and—sometimes and only secondarily—a sense of how that vocabulary (and the doctrines it presupposes) becomes psychologically and/or rationally entrenched in certain contexts.

To some extent, the project I'm describing here is similar to or even a part of what is commonly called "philosophical theology." But this has become a contested term in recent years, and so some distinctions might help to clarify the

³⁰ I don't assume here that "acceptance" and "faith" are the same thing in the contemporary context (though I think they are in the Kantian context). In effect the debate about the doxastic, non-doxastic, and other attitudes and dispositions involved in the liturgical stance is a debate about what *faith* might be, and how it relates to various principles of rational engagement and attitude-formation. [2020 update: For a summary of recent developments, see Buchak ([forthcoming](#))].

³¹ In the effort to focus on "thick" doctrines as opposed to "thin" or "bare" theism, I take myself to be following Marilyn McCord Adams's example in (1999) and (2006). See also Johnston (2011) on the idolatry of "thin, generic theism."

recommendation I'm making. One thing that liturgical philosophy of religion might involve is simply

- (1) Good old-fashioned conceptual analysis applied to “vested,” robust concepts and doctrines of religious significance.

Few philosophers in the post-Quinean context are optimistic about the prospects of *pure* conceptual or ordinary language analysis, however, and so liturgical philosophy would need to go beyond (1) if it is to avoid seeming like a massive throw-back. Fortunately, there are other candidates:

- (2) The use of the characteristic tools of analytic philosophy³² to mount arguments involving vested religious concepts and doctrines. These tools include: logical apparatuses of various sorts (deductive, probabilistic, modal, deontic, etc.); abduction; rational intuition; thought-experiment; reflective equilibrium; appeal to substantive theory-building constraints such as simplicity, elegance, and explanatory depth; rigor, clarity, and rhetorical understatement; shyness regarding grand sweeping narratives, and, of course, necessary-and-sufficient-conditions analysis of our concepts, refined by appeal to often-outlandish counterexamples.

The problem with (2) is that it is hard to distinguish it from everything else that falls under the rubric of “philosophical theology.” So while (2) is consistent with the sort of liturgical philosophy I'm recommending here, or even an important component of it, it can't be the whole thing, for fear of losing our topic.

A third candidate is

- (3) The use of principled appeals to collective religious sources—viz., revelation to a group, public testimony from religious authorities, communal tradition, liturgical canons, and corporate ceremonial experience—in order to
- (a) supply topics and direct inquiry;
 - (b) supply *prima facie* non-epistemic justification;
 - (c) see whether and how attitudes (perhaps even some beliefs) that are *prima facie* justified on other grounds might be challenged by input from these sources; and
 - (d) better understand what it is like to be somewhere on the Ladder of Liturgical Sincerity with respect to such doctrines.

Note, first, that according to (a) these “special religious sources” can supply topics for philosophical reflection. One of the main things a liturgical philosopher might do is pay close attention to the practices of a given group and try to reconstruct the metaphysical and epistemological commitments they presuppose. What sorts of commitments or doctrines would make sense of the act of venerating an icon or taking a vow of obedience?³³ After making these explicit, she might then go on to criticize those commitments on ethical or philosophical grounds, or seek to make them coherent with other commitments at the heart of the relevant tradition.

³²I do not mean to suggest that these tools are the sole possession of analytic philosophers, obviously.

³³ [2020 update: Here see Wolterstorff 2015.]

This leads to (b) and (c): the appeal to collective religious sources can offer a kind of justification for religious attitudes. For example: suppose that the doctrine that the universe is the result of emanation rather than either creation or chance is one for which a person has little or no justification. But suppose he then recognizes that the emanation doctrine is a part of the scriptural and communal tradition into which he has taken up the liturgical stance. Other things equal, that recognition may supply the doctrine with some further justification for him – albeit of a *non*-epistemic sort that supports insincere forms of teleological engagement (hope, acceptance, etc.).

Conversely, someone else may have plenty of ordinary, epistemic justification for the commonsense belief that each person is a unique being. But this belief is (at least) psychologically challenged when she realizes that a central, settled doctrine of her ecclesiastical tradition is that at least one being comprises three different persons. Perhaps this realization reduces the strength of her credence or causes her to suspend, even though it hasn't taken away any evidence. Or perhaps she realizes that she never had first-person evidence for the belief in the first place and that it was justified on testimony that she now has reason to question. Or perhaps she continues to hold the belief and at the same time adopts the acceptance that a unique being can somehow be three different persons (and also the hope that her belief will somehow subside?). Hope and even acceptance that *not-p* in such a case may be both psychologically and rationally compatible with belief that *p*. Indeed, I think that in liturgical engagement contexts, this will be a fairly common noetic configuration – towards the top of our Ladder, but still not on the top rung.

Note that (3) *does* clearly distinguish this kind of liturgical philosophy from natural theology, granting (as is customary) that the latter does not properly make appeals to these kinds of special religious sources. In other words, natural theology involves arguments about religiously relevant philosophical issues, but these arguments are constructed in such a way that, ideally, others will be able to feel their probative force on the basis of what Kant would call “mere reason.”³⁴ Liturgical philosophy in the mode of (3), by contrast, appeals to sources of topics and (non-epistemic) justification that go well beyond our collective heritage as rational beings with the usual complement of cognitive faculties. It can be engaged experimentally by inquirers who have no commitments of their own on the matter, or more confessionally by people who are or want to be practicing members of the tradition in question.

(3) contains hints about how we can distinguish liturgical philosophy from other species of revealed theology. One paradigmatically philosophical feature of (3) is that it uses appeals to special religious sources that are “principled” – and strives to formulate those principles as explicitly as possible. Doing so will presumably require the use of the philosophical tools that are mentioned in (2), tools that aren't

³⁴ [Updated 2020: See Chignell/Pereboom (2020) and Kolb/Chignell (2020).]

as often employed by biblical and systematic theologians.³⁵ A related feature of this approach is that the *concepts* involved in the relevant attitudes would be clarified, analyzed, and sometimes adjusted using the tools in (2). This means that (3) is not only compatible with, but also typically involves (2). And of course (2) often requires (1), given that conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) is one of the well-honed tools of philosophy. This merging of our three candidates into one is welcome, and something like the conjunction of (1)–(3) is what I am trying to recommend here as part of the liturgical turn in philosophy of religion. But (3) is really its hallmark.

When philosophers *have* dealt with classical, vested theological loci (for example, in the Christian tradition: Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement etc.) they have often merely started with some rather blasé formulation of the doctrine and then chipped away at it with the tools of analytic philosophy in order to show that it can be made coherent (or not) on some contemporary metaphysical scheme. But (3) includes appeals to sacred texts, oral and bodily traditions, authorities of various sorts, and the communal muscle memory embodied in ceremonies *not* just in order to get the doctrine squarely in front of us, but *also* to have a sense of its history, context, and origins. (People in sociology and cultural studies have been much better than philosophers at this sort of historicizing, contextualizing project (see e.g. Luhmann 2012)). The goal of liturgical philosophy of religion, then, would be to focus on vested doctrines rather than denuded theism, and to valorize philosophical clarity and precision without at the same time ignoring context, history, materiality, and tradition.³⁶

A final key point: none of this is intended to suggest that communal practice or liturgy is *unassailable*. Indeed, part of the liturgical turn could involve (following Kant once again and) focusing on places where philosophical considerations might appropriately challenge a liturgical practice or our understanding thereof. To take an extreme and obvious example: the fact that human or animal sacrifice is part of a tradition's ceremonial practice does not defeat the overwhelming moral and theological reasons that *practitioners*, along with everyone else, have to shun it. The same might be true regarding the liturgical utterance of certain historical creeds and prayers. It would be wrong, for instance, to participate in the ceremonies of a

³⁵I am not suggesting that systematic theologians do not make principled appeals to collective religious sources, nor am I suggesting that they make unprincipled appeals to such sources. The point is rather one of emphasis: in the liturgical philosophy of religion, a premium would be placed on making explicit precisely how it is that the deliverances of “collective religious sources” can increase or decrease our justification for taking certain attitudes towards a doctrine.

³⁶Marilyn McCord Adams (1999) utilizes these three different kinds of tools in an effort to response to what she calls the “concrete logical problem” of horrendous evil. More specifically, she invokes some of the vested doctrines (ontological and axiological) of the Christian tradition to generate scenarios that show how it is logically possible for horrendous evils to be defeated within the individual life and perspective of a victim or perpetrator. She also demonstrates (in Adams 2008) how practices of prayer might lead us to focus in hope on those possibilities.

Christian Identity group, even if you don't believe any of their racist doctrines. Likewise, it is at least up for grabs (and an interesting item of debate for liturgical philosophers of religion) whether it is permissible to non-doxastically utter the Orthodox Jewish prayer: "Blessed are you, HaShem, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman."

6.4 Philosophy of the Liturgy

I've discussed some of the central attitudes that characterize the liturgical stance, as well as some of the propositional objects of that liturgical attitude and how we might philosophically handle them. It remains now to sketch some ways in which philosophers of religion might look to actual liturgical practices in various religious traditions to find out *how* such vested doctrines are made into objects of possible acceptance.

Religious ritual has been closely studied across various fields: anthropology, sociology, literary theory, cultural studies, religious studies, and even theology.³⁷ But few trained philosophers have looked closely at the relevant phenomena, even philosophers of religion.³⁸ This is regrettable, since not only the attitudes involved in the liturgical stance, and not only the vested objects of those attitudes, but also the *apparatuses* used by those who take that stance—iconography, symbol, metaphor, gesture—can have philosophical significance and be worthy of philosophical reflection and analysis. Social philosophers, for instance, might be able to provide new and deeper understandings of how ritual allows practitioners to represent religious doctrines, invest them with meaning, remember them collectively, and perform (as well as motivate) their acceptance of them. Philosophers working close to cognitive science and psychology might be able to discern how certain 'priming' events (including various liturgical sounds, aromas, and gestures) can lead religious people to interpret and interact with their surroundings in a particular way or even to form certain religious attitudes or 'intuitions.' Philosophy of literature and art might examine ways in which the tools, texts, and objects of ceremonial practice allow for

³⁷ In theology, the seminal sources are Bell (1992), (1997) and Pickstock (1998). These texts would presumably be important touchstones for work on the philosophy of liturgy.

³⁸ [2020 update: As noted earlier, Wolterstorff has now published a book on the matter (2018), following other studies by Bruce Benson (2013) and (Wolterstorff's student) Terence Cuneo (2016). James K.A. Smith has published a trilogy of popular books on "Cultural Liturgies" (2009–2017); Michael Scott has reinvigorated the discussion of religious language (partly in liturgical contexts) in a series of articles (including 2017); Claire Carlisle has developed a sophisticated theory of religious habit as part of liturgical practice (see her 2013); and Mark Wynn works in the phenomenology of religious practice in, for example, certain architectural spaces (see his 2011 and 2013).]

the *Versinnlichung* (“sensible rendering” – a Kantian term) of ideas whose objects, strictly speaking, are beyond the bounds of possible experience.³⁹

Finally, in some contexts it will be fruitful to reverse the order of explanation and ask how the endorsement of a specific doctrine (the Buddhist no-self doctrine, for instance) both shapes and explains certain liturgical practices (see e.g. Collins 1990). This might lead to interesting debates about when the doctrine, as opposed to the liturgy, is in the theoretical driver’s seat, so to speak.

Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogy of Morals* that “The more abstract a truth you want to teach, the more you must seduce the senses to it.” The idea I’ve been merely sketching in this last section is that a liturgical turn in philosophy of religion might lead us to reflect not only on the abstract truths taught by catechism and creed, but also on how they “seduce the senses” in the context of religious ceremony and corporate practice.

6.5 Conclusion

Philosophy of religion in the twenty-first century is and will be an increasingly global enterprise. Because of the vast differences in religious doctrine and practice amongst various peoples and philosophers, there will inevitably be an urge to continue focusing on the justification of doctrines involving “bare” concepts (God, the Real, the sacred, the transcendent) —doctrines that are viewed as unifying threads between diverse traditions. Although the urge is not a bad one, I have suggested here that it threatens to leave us with a philosophy that is about (i) attitudes that many religious people do not often have towards (ii) doctrines that most traditions would deem woefully denuded, for the sake of (iii) making claims to a kind of justification that few of us ever possess.

A liturgical turn in the philosophy of religion would offer a corrective to all of this abstraction by urging that we *also* apply philosophical tools to the “vested” doctrines present in the words and actions of real-world liturgical practice, and analyze the way these practices model, symbolize, picture, and act out those doctrines in a way that makes them viable objects of substantial religious attitudes. These vested doctrines (rather than those of bare theism) are what religious people actually hope for or accept (rather than believe, oftentimes), and the decision to engage them liturgically is typically part of what leads to (or even constitutes) the formation of

³⁹“*Versinnlichung*” (“sensible rendering”) is Kant’s term in the *Critique of Judgment* for what beautiful art and nature can do with respect to the transcendental ideas of uncognizable supersensibles (see Kant 1902–, 5:356.) In *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* he notes that “we always need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us” (1902 –, 6:65n). And in a striking comment in a lecture on anthropology, Kant says of the arts what he might just as well say of religious ceremony: “The entire utility of the beautiful arts is that they set ... propositions of reason in their full glory and powerfully support them” (1902–, 25:33).

such attitudes. Finally, a liturgical philosophy of religion would keep in mind the checkered history of these doctrines and their representation in the life of particular communities, thus allowing us better to grasp not just the theoretical meaning of the doctrines, but also what it practically means to live by (or reject) them.⁴⁰

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